

Bob Woodward interview with President Barack Obama, the White House, July 10, 2010 (transcribed by E. Duffy):

Obama: Robert's got at least four of them. So... [Laughter.]

Gibbs: Bob knows all about the [taping?] [?] in this office.

Obama: I know. He's got a history about taping in the Oval. [Laughter.]

Q: I can't tell you how shocked I was about that.

Obama: You know, I still find it unbelievable.

Q: Unbelievable.

Obama: And that would be something. You got the whole tape recorder going on? I got to talk to Leon, make sure that one's completely disarmed. [Laughter.] Anyway, fire away.

Q: Sir. I sent those questions in, I don't...

Obama: These guys have given me a full briefing in terms of what your intentions are, how you're shaping the book.

Q: Great. Thank you.

Obama: So we don't need a lot of wind-up.

Q: Where would you start the movie? The book?

Obama: You know, I'd probably start it back in 2002, when the debate was taking place about the run-up to Iraq. And that was probably the first speech I gave on foreign policy that got a lot of attention. And part of my premise in opposing the Iraq[i?] invasion was that this was going to be a distraction from what should be our principal goal, which is to go after al Qaeda. You know, you fast-forward to 2007, by the time I announced my candidacy for the presidency, I think that my assessment and the assessment of a lot of opponents of the Iraq war had been borne out. We had gone through five years of drift in Afghanistan. The Taliban had reconstituted itself in a way that people hadn't anticipated when they were planning the Iraq

war. There just didn't seem to be a clear, coherent strategy there.

Q: The famous 2002 speech, "U.S. occupation of undetermined length, at undetermined cost, with undetermined consequences." If you think about that, undetermined time, undetermined cost, undetermined consequences, isn't this kind of the nature of all war.

Obama: [Laughs.] Well, the ... You are absolutely right that ...

Q: I ask that because you're wrestling with that...

Obama: To quote a famous American, "War is hell." And once the dogs of war are unleashed, you don't know where it's going to lead. When I entered into office, we had two wars taking place. So once you're in, what you're trying to do is to impose clarity on the chaos.

Q: But the backdrop of that is that mindset and that realization that you're entering a kind of Never-Never Land where you don't control things like you do in some other parts of your office, [sir? or?]. No or yes?

Obama: No, I wouldn't say that. What I would say is, is that because of the nature of war, you have an obligation to work over, again and again, your goals, your mission, your progress. Are we staying focused? Are we preventing mission creep? Are we clear about the end game? I think there're... It entails so much of the country's resources, so much of our blood and treasure, and unleashes so many passions that the discipline of policymakers is even greater during wartime than it would be otherwise.

Q: And you can't lose a war or be perceived to lose a war, can you? As president? In this country, in this time?

Obama: Well, you know, I think that... I think about it not so much in the classic, do you lose a war on my watch? Or win a war on a president's watch? I think about it more in terms of, do you successfully prosecute a strategy that results in the country being stronger rather than weaker at the end of it? And the reason I say that is because I think what's clear in both an

Iraq situation or an Afghanistan situation is you don't have the emperor of Japan meeting with Douglas MacArthur and formally surrendering. That's just not the nature of the nature of these asymmetric threats that we're dealing with.

Q: But you want to end in a position where you're stronger.

Obama: Yeah.

Q: I was talking to Axelrod about lynchpin moments. And I've identified, unfortunately, 72. [Laughter.]

Obama: Okay.

Q: And I'm worried about the ones I don't know.

Obama: This'll be like *Jeopardy*.

Q: [Laughs.] That's right. Quick answers. But it's such a serious matter, and clearly what emerges from the record is you've given it serious attention, to say the least.

Obama: Right.

Q: Two days after you're elected, McConnell, who's then DNI, comes with the CIA man Mike Morell, and they brief you in Chicago, give you kind of the first real look at the deep intelligence secrets. What was your reaction after that briefing?

Obama: I'm just going to - I know that you and Robert talked about this, but I'm just going to preface this answer with sort of a general view of how I'm going to approach this interview, Bob.

Q: Yes, sir.

Obama: And that is that you have commentary or reporting on specific conversations, specific dates, etc. My job as president is not going to be to corroborate or dispute particular comments or statements. What I'll try to give you is a general overview of how I was thinking at any particular point in time.

Q: That's what I want.

Obama: So it is absolutely true that, you know, you get elected, and fairly rapidly during transition you have the DNI and the CIA come in and give you a briefing on a wide range of issues. Obviously Afghanistan was on that list. And I think it's fair to say that their assessment of the situation in Afghanistan and in Pakistan and along that border region was sobering. It wasn't surprising, because we had started to see these reports coming out during the course of 2007. It did corroborate some of my deepest concerns about the fact that the Taliban had strengthened, were controlling more parts of the territory, and that we did not have a strategy in Pakistan for the FATA and the Northwest Region. And you'll recall, this was a significant issue during the debate. It is now conventional wisdom that you have to look at this as Afghanistan/Pakistan. But when I was in my Democratic primary...

Q: I remember, sir.

Obama: You know, we got beat up a little bit by saying, this can't just be an Afghan strategy. We've got to also focus on Pakistan. So the briefings that I received during transition confirmed the fact that we had problems on the Pakistani side of the border as well that had to be addressed.

Q: Particularly, as I understand McConnell said, the Quetta Shura in Pakistan were just a giant... In fact I think he told you, that's the center of gravity. And you asked, what are we doing about that? And he said, not much.

Obama: Well, again, I won't confirm specific - or deny specific - conversations, but I will tell you that what was presented to me in 2008, I guess it'd be around December, or maybe it was January - it must've been December, because by January I was back in Chicago - confirmed that fact that you had the Taliban, the Quetta Shura, the Haqqani network, a whole range of these al Qaeda affiliates, essentially, who were operating very aggressively. And we were not putting a lot of pressure on them.

Q: And did you say, okay, this is one of the things I'm going to try to fix?

Obama: Yes.

Q: And during this period, I guess it was November 10, about a week after, less than a week after your election, you met with Gates at that fire house at National Airport.

Obama: I'll go ahead and confirm that [?]. [Laughter.] I did meet Gates there.

Gibbs: [?].

Obama: Yes.

Q: Tell me - because this is so important in this narrative. How did you decide to retain Gates?

Obama: You know, I had observed Gates as a senator and as a member of the Foreign Relations Committee when he came in. And he generally impressed me as somebody who was clear-thinking, obviously a great patriot who had served in a range of capacities, but possessed a hard-headed, clear-eyed view of America's national interests, was not interested in grandstanding, was willing to take on the Pentagon bureaucracy but also would defend it when it needed defending. Was...

Q: What did you say to him in that meeting? Because that was... Did you close the deal pretty fast?

Obama: Fairly quickly. I mean, what I said to him was that we were in the middle of two wars. That I thought he had done an outstanding job as secretary of defense. That the policies he had pursued in Iraq to solidify the gains that had been made as a consequence of the surge, and then to usher in the SOFA and the strategic framework agreement, had been sound. And that it did not make sense, from my perspective, for us to change secretaries of defense. I thought he was going to be an important part of my team, and I wanted him to stay.

Q: What did he say?

Obama: He said, I was on my way back to the Northwest, but Mr. President, I take very seriously your desire to make sure that we are building on the progress we've made in Iraq. I share with you your concerns about the direction in Afghanistan. And I'm willing to stay and work with you, but I'll have to talk to my wife. [Laughter.] Which is always, if somebody doesn't tell

me that, then I think, you know... Until they talk to their wife, it's not a real yes, yeah, it's not a done deal.

Q: It's not a real yes. Makes sense.

Obama: Or husband.

Q: And then in December, Hayden, the CIA director, gave you the covert action briefing and went into more detail. Did you, is there some way... I guess I'd ask the question this way, your diary entry that night? Now I've seen the deep secrets, my reaction is - what?

Obama: You know, I'm not going to comment on my reaction to our deep secrets. What I'll say is this, that I think the Iraq war had consumed an enormous amount of energy and time. And one of my goals coming in as president was to return to a broader conception of what our national security interests were, to restore a sense of balance, to make sure that our efforts in going after al Qaeda and terrorists were grounded in a broader strategic framework. That our efforts to stabilize Iraq were constantly measured with respect to the opportunity costs of what we were doing there versus what we were doing in Afghanistan, versus how that was influencing perceptions of America in the Muslim world generally, versus how we were spending money on homeland security. Right? So there wasn't anything in the briefings that I received in the transition period that dissuaded me from the fact that we needed to reorient our foreign policy in a fundamental [way?].

Q: One of your friends quoted you after this essentially saying, "I'm inheriting a world that could blow up any minute in half a dozen ways, and I will have some powerful but limited and fragile tools to keep that from happening." Is that a reflection of your state of mind after...

Obama: I think what is true is that as president, you very rapidly realize that, despite the title of leader of the free world, despite the fact that we have the best military in the history of the world and we are the wealthiest nation in the history of the world, that [events?] are messy out there. And it's a big world. And that's precisely why you've got to have discipline in making choices about how you go about things. At

any given moment of the day, there are explosive, tragic, heinous, hazardous things taking place. All of which, objectively, you would say, somebody should do something about this.

Q: And now it's your account, to a certain extent.

Obama: And ... Yeah. And now you are the president, and people are saying, you're the most powerful person on earth, why aren't you doing something about it? And for that reason, you have to go in saying, all these things are important, but here are the three or four things that I have to get done in order to make sure that the country is safe. And so, I'll just give you one example which may seem a little far afield, but I think connects directly. I said very early on, as a senator, and continued to believe as a presidential candidate and now as president, that we can absorb a terrorist attack. We'll do everything we can to prevent it, but even a 9/11, even the biggest attack ever, that ever took place on our soil, we absorbed it and we are stronger. This is a strong, powerful country that we live in, and our people are incredibly resilient. A potential game-changer would be a nuclear weapon in the hands of terrorists, blowing up a major American city. Or a weapon of mass destruction in a major American city. And so when I go down the list of things I have to worry about all the time, that is at the top, because that's one area where you can't afford any mistakes. And so right away, coming in, we said, how are we going to start ramping up and putting that at the center of a lot of our national security discussion? Making sure that that occurrence, even if remote, never happens.

Q: And I understanding one of the findings when you came in was that a lot of the contingency plans hadn't really been worked on. A lot of the -

Obama: I won't discuss those.

Q: Sir?

Obama: I won't discuss them.

Q: You won't. Okay. I just want you to know I've been told that by people who work with you, and I don't want you to...

Obama: I will neither confirm or deny that.

Q: Okay. I ... Like the Iran contingency plan, 1025, which is quite... Well, this is significant, that the Bush administration with all the saber-rattling was not preparing for some of the worst-case scenarios out there. Is that fair?

Obama: The only thing I will say is this, that ... Again, the ... You asked earlier about the nature of war. Wars absorb so much energy on the part of any administration that even if people are doing an outstanding job, if they're in the middle of a war - particularly one that's going badly, as it was, obviously, for a three-year stretch there in Iraq - that's taking up a huge amount of energy on the part of everybody. And that means that there are some things that get left undone.

Q: And your goal is to deal with the war, but to reorient national priorities, commitments...

Obama: It was as I came in, and continues to be to this day.

Q: Okay. Now, three days after you take over, there's the first NSC meeting about Afghanistan, what to do. General McKiernan's asking for 30,000 troops. What'd you think of that?

Obama: Well, I think it was important to note that General McKiernan had been asking for those troops for a long time. And hadn't gotten them, and then finally right at the end of the Bush presidency, they'd gotten a portion of his request.

Q: Got 10,000.

Obama: I'll be honest with you, at the time, if you had asked the average American how many troops were being devoted to Afghanistan, I think they would've been surprised that for most of that stretch, 25, 20. I think people didn't fully realize the degree of mismatch between ...

Q: Under-resourced.

Obama: ...the resources going into Iraq and the resources going into Afghanistan. So the first thing we had to confront was that you had an Afghan election that had been scheduled. And there were strong warnings, both from the military as well as our intelligence agencies, that if we did not bolster security

in Afghanistan rapidly, that the election might not come off, and in fact you could see a country that splintered.

Q: Did you believe that?

Obama: Yes.

Q: You did. It turns out that the troops you sent, a lot of them didn't go to help for the election, as you may know.

Obama: Well, what happened was, is that Bush had ordered a number in there. So some of those did go into areas that helped with the elections.

Q: Yes, sir.

Obama: But that left bare some other regions of the country. So I looked at it from a comprehensive perspective. But the general view was, A, we had to make sure that the election went off without a hitch, and that was a number-one priority. And Gates and I discussed this. I discussed it with Mike Mullen. What I then said, though, was, is that we have to do a soup to nuts review of what it is that we're trying to accomplish in Afghanistan, how it links up with Pakistan, and that we are not going to order any additional troops beyond the 17,000 that we were sending in for the election without us having done a serious analysis of what our strategy was there.

Q: What were your thoughts, as somebody not used to making those decisions, making that first combat deployment, 17,000? That's a lot of people and a lot of families and... What's the inside of the commander in chief on that, I mean, if you can help me?

Obama: This is always the toughest decision that I make as president. It... What helped in making these decisions was as this point I had been able to work with Gates, Mullen, Odierno on our schedule for winding down the war in Iraq, and had become comfortable with not just strategic but also operational questions. And had garnered confidence and trust in Gates, Mullen and others being willing to have an honest exchange with me. Having said that, whenever you order young men and women into [a theater?]...

Q: Because you waited, that weekend. They gave you the four options...

Obama: Right.

Q: ...you waited.

Obama: It's ...

Q: Can you give me any diary entry or sense of the ...

Obama: I just think that the first time that you sign off on an order to send young men and women into a battle theater, you feel the weight of [the? that?] decision. And it is ...

Q: Do you pause?

Obama: Yes.

Q: How many times?

Obama: [Laughs.] You pause...

Q: I ask that out of trying to...

Obama: No, no, no.

Q: I can't comprehend doing that.

Obama: Yeah, I... Look, I think that you make sure that you have thought through all the alternatives, and that you feel confident enough that this is the best decision, that it justifies potentially some of those kids not coming back. And the challenge is that you never have 100 percent certainty.

Q: Well said.

Obama: So all you can say is, of all the array of possibilities I've got, this is the best option that I see. And knowing that some of those kids may not come back, or if they come back they're going to be grievously injured, it is still in the country's interests to do it.

Q: What'd you think of the Riedel report?

Obama: You know, Bruce worked very hard on it. Then I took a trip I think out to California, and then had Bruce...

Q: He briefed you on the plane.

Obama: ...had Bruce fly back with me, and we spent a couple hours just going over it after I'd reviewed it. I think I read it on the way out and he briefed me on the way back. And I thought it was a very useful document. Mainly because it was the first sign that we'd stepped back and said, okay, where are we now in Afghanistan? in a comprehensive way. And ... I think his analysis, his description of what was taking place in Afghanistan and in Pakistan, holds up to this day. I think...

Q: He really focused on Pakistan, though, didn't he? In the briefing...

Obama: He did. And that was important to me. And we talked about that a lot. Because nobody, I think, had really evaluated exactly how the deterioration of the border regions in Pakistan were influencing or feeding what was taking place in Afghanistan. So overall, I thought it was an outstanding report. Now, what it did was help to shape a strategy going forward that would be a AfPak strategy, explicitly. It looked at our military strategy, but also our civilian strategy. It had a, you know, pretty clear-eyed assessment of the challenges facing the Afghan government and Afghan security forces. The contributions of ISAF. And so gave us a platform from which to start building a theory of the case in terms of how we could arrive at a successful outcome. But...

Q: His theory ... Yes, sir.

Obama: One last thing I wanted to say **[about it? Bob?]**. I think the most important aspect of the entire exercise with the Riedel report was making sure everybody reminded ourselves of how we got in there in the first place, which was that al Qaeda had killed 3,000 Americans, and that our goal here had to be focused on dismantling and defeating those extremist elements in that region that could launch an attack on the U.S. homeland or our allies or our outposts. And really drumming home that that was our core interest, and then there might be a whole range of other issues that then grew from that.

Q: It called for a fully-resourced counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan.

Obama: Well, the ... Remember what I said, which was that the Riedel report, I viewed as stage one.

Q: I see.

Obama: Because what it did was it provided us with a description. It provided us with a framework. But what it also said was that we're going to have to evaluate, post-election, where's Karzai? Where are the security forces? Have the 17,000 additional troops made a difference in blunting momentum? We're going to have to do an assessment, then, moving forward, to see how in fact all these pieces start fitting together. We're going to have to approach the Pakistanis and see, what are they willing to do in getting serious about the insurgents in their mix?

Q: And on the ... The briefing with Riedel, I understand, he really emphasized Pakistan and said, you really have to worry about al Qaeda. They're recruiting, training and actively plotting and communicating in a way that he as a Pakistani expert didn't understand fully.

Obama: I think if you read the report...

Q: I have reviewed it, yes, sir.

Obama: I think Bruce felt very strongly, as I did, that we had to have a serious heart-to-heart with Pakistani civilian, military and intelligence leaders.

Q: And it continues to this day, does it not?

Obama: It continues to this day.

Q: May 11, Gates decides that General McKiernan is going to be replaced by General McChrystal. What did you think of that? He had you approve it?

Obama: Well, it was ultimately my decision.

Q: Yes, sir.

Obama: Gates and Mullen came to me and said that General McKiernan had performed admirably, had done outstanding work,

but in light of the urgency of the situation, they felt that the best person to do the job at this stage was General McChrystal.

Q: Had you met him and talked to him at that point? I don't think you had.

Obama: You know, I had not had a person-to-person conversation with him.

Q: Did, in a sense, did you have any feeling, you're picking your Eisenhower, to a certain extent, for your war?

Obama: I did feel as if it was important to have somebody who could look at the situation with fresh eyes, with renewed vigor and energy. And who felt ownership over our new strategy.

Q: And did you... You look back on it now, did you feel you were sufficiently involved in that decision at that point, picking your Eisenhower? If that's a fair...

Obama: Yeah, I mean, I think ... You know **[Bob?]**, when you say picking an Eisenhower or a General Marshall, I think that ... A, I don't want to analogize myself to FDR. **[Laughs.]** B, I don't want to analogize the Afghan effort to World War II.

Q: But it is your war.

Obama: But what I will say is, is that given the timeframes we were operating under, it was important for me to satisfy myself that this was the best person we had available.

Q: And then in May, and this connects to what Riedel was saying and your points about Pakistan, there are reports that come in that Westerners are being trained in Pakistan to come back to the United States or Canada or so forth and kind of sets off an alarm bell. Which really kind of leads, indirectly at least, to the uncovering of the Zazi and the Headley case, if you know what I'm referring to?

Obama: Well, the ... I won't get into the weeds on this, Bob, but I will tell you this, that what ... Rather than go through a timeline, because you have the advantage of having looked at the timeline...

Q: I'm sorry, I just...

Obama: So I'll give you sort of a broad sense of the arc over the last 18 months. As a consequence of our focus on Pakistan, we saw a real change in how Pakistan operates. I mean, they sent an army into the Swat valley and into some of these Northwest Provinces that you would not have seen two or three years ago. Part of it was prompted by the extraordinary brutality of the Taliban within Pakistan, in a way that turned the Pakistan population against their homegrown Taliban. The people suddenly realized, this isn't America's war, this is in fact being directed at innocent Pakistani civilians. They also ramped up their CT cooperation in a way that over the last 18 months has hunkered down al Qaeda in a way that is significant.

Q: But still not enough.

Obama: Well, exactly. So the point is, is that the pressure and the dialogue and the attempt to rebuild better relationships with Pakistan that had in part deteriorated in the aftermath of the Presley amendment, Pressler amendment. All those things have had an impact in securing better cooperation. But, number one, it's not enough. Al Qaeda is still dangerous. Number two, what you've seen is a metastasizing of al Qaeda, where a range of loosely affiliated groups now have the capacity and the ambition to recruit and train for attacks that may not be on the scale of a 9/11, but obviously can still be extraordinarily...

Q: One man, one bomb.

Obama: One man, one bomb, in Times Square, on a subway... Which could still have, obviously, an extraordinary traumatizing effect on the homeland. And that makes our job tougher. It means that the information we need to go against those networks is more granular. It has to be more specific. And all those are significant challenges.

Q: Real quickly, last summer, General Jones went to Afghanistan. I went along. When he told the generals, if you ask for more troops you're going to create a Whiskey Tango Foxtrot moment for President Obama. [Laughter.] Did that reflect your thinking?

Obama: You know, I wasn't there with Jim. But you know, the truth of the matter is despite how all this plays out in the

press, I ... One of the things I'm proud about is that not just I but our entire team, and that includes the secretary of defense, that includes Mike Mullen, that includes Jim Jones, that includes Joe Biden and the people on the ground in Afghanistan, I think everybody has tried to make the very best decision they can based on information that is often uncertain and is dynamic. And a situation that's dynamic. And ...

Q: But at that point, did that...

Obama: And so once McChrystal was in and he was on the ground doing exactly what he should've been doing, which was...

Q: Making an assessment.

Obama: ...making his own assessment, I think that at that point we understood that even with the additional troops that had gone in, even though the election had occurred - not without some significant dustups - that the Taliban's momentum had not been blunted. The situation was still dangerous. And there was going to be more work to do. And at that point, the main thing that I was insisting on as commander in chief is that the assessment have a strategy before we start talking about resources. Because - this goes back to the earlier point we were making about just the nature of war. Because of the enormity of the resources involved, the ramp-up times involved, etc., the ease with which something gets momentum...

Q: So you set up your strategy review.

Obama: And so what I said was, okay. Situation continues to be very difficult. Let's make sure that we are linking up our overarching foreign policy and national security strategy with our clear goals in Afghanistan and Pakistan with what exactly our objectives are, what our tactics are. And at that point, then let's have a discussion about resources. But I'm not going to front-load decisions about resources before I've got a clarity about strategy.

Q: What did you think about General McChrystal's assessment, the long 60-page thing that said, if we don't get more troops in 12 months we'll likely have mission failure?

Obama: I thought that it was a useful document to begin a much more rigorous discussion internally. And a robust debate internally, because what I think it did was it clarified a gap in what had come out of the Riedel report. I think...

Q: Which was?

Obama: Which was that... And this was not, this wasn't anybody's fault. It was sort of the nature of the stages of us shaping a strategy. I think the Riedel report retained ambiguity about what our central mission was.

Q: That's correct.

Obama: It was interpreted by some as an argument for a beefed-up force that was conducting a counterterrorism strategy, with some elements of protecting populations, working with local leaders and so forth. But that it was still primarily focused on counterterrorism. It was interpreted by others as a commitment to a full-blown COIN strategy, as had been classically laid out by General Petraeus. And so when the McChrystal assessment comes in, I think at that point what became clear to me was, we've got to get everybody in a room and make sure that everybody is singing from the same hymnal.

Q: Because he was told the mission is defeat the Taliban.

Obama: Exactly. And I think...

Q: And you said in one of the meetings that we did a disservice to him because that's not necessarily what we mean.

Obama: Well, I think it sharpened everybody's thinking. If your premise is that you have to defeat the Taliban, then part of what you're purchasing is responsibility for Afghanistan over the long term, in which you have completely eliminated a home-grown Pashtun insurgency. And the question I wanted to make sure we asked was, is that in fact what is necessary in order to provide for America's security? Now, that may be a desirable outcome. We may want to work with the international community and the Afghan government in order to assure that the Taliban have no influence within Afghanistan, but is that sufficiently core to America's national interests that we want to...

Q: And your ultimately decision was, we want to degrade the Taliban. We want to reduce it.

Obama: What ... We're fast-forwarding. At the end of the review, what became clear to everybody was that our core national interests and what was an achievable objective was to degrade the Taliban sufficiently so that it didn't have control over key population center, key transit centers. So that the Afghan government would have the space and the time within which to build up its capacity and control that country.

Q: Help me about the vice president. Because in these meetings I have detailed - I've gone over with Robert - detailed notes.

Obama: Right. Right.

Q: And accounts that go on and on, to the point that it would bore anyone, and so I'm having to reduce some of it. And Joe Biden is in there pushing for counterterrorism plus. Passionately, rigorously. I've looked at some of the details. I think in a sense some of his very good questions never got answered, really, because it's a potent argument. What did you think of it? And what did you think of his role as the kind of [aggressive?] contrarian?

Obama: I encouraged it.

Q: You did? Person-to-person?

Obama: Yes.

Q: What'd you say to him?

Obama: I said, Joe, I want you to say exactly what you think. And I want you to ask the toughest questions you can think of. And the reason is, is because I think the American people are best served and our troops are best served by a vigorous debate on these kinds of life-or-death issues. I wanted every argument on every side to be poked hard. And if we felt a little give there, we wanted to keep on pushing until finally you hit up against something that was incontrovertible and something that we could all agree to. And so in that sense I think Joe served an enormously useful function.

Q: Did - some thought he pushed it too far, but...

Obama: I didn't.

Q: You did not.

Obama: No. Because I think that it... Now, I want to make a distinction, and I'm not... Again, going back to my initial caveat on this interview, I'm not going to go blow-by-blow in terms of the discussions that were had, primarily because I want to encourage...

Q: But you understand I'm going to publish them based on what your staff and what notes and memos...

Obama: I understand. Well, I understand that you're going to publish something. [Laughter.]

Q: Yes, sir.

Obama: But you're not going to quote me having confirmed or denied what you publish.

Q: No, no, that's...

Obama: But ...

Q: I want to get it right.

Obama: I know you do, and I respect that, and the process that you go through, Bob. But understand my job as president is to have the most open, honest debate possible on these issues. I don't want people looking over their shoulders, pre-positioning themselves, thinking to themselves, you know what, at some point, this is going to come out in a Washington Post story or a New York Times story. Now, that's the nature of Washington. I think generally speaking we've been pretty good about preventing that kind of dynamic from occurring. But here's the general point that I want to make. There's a difference between vigorous debate in leading up to a decision...

Q: Yes, sir, I understand.

Obama: Versus constant re-litigation once a decision is made. And so my view has always been, I want the most forceful open process possible until I've made the decision. And once I've made the decision, I want everybody to continue to internally

figure out how we're best going to implement it. But what I don't want is a disunity of effort.

Q: Understand. Understand.

Obama: And that's something that we do have to guard against.

Q: Understand. In one of these meetings, you raise an important point where you say, we can't sustain support at home and with allies without having some explanation that involves timelines, in terms of the Afghan war.

Obama: I don't recall that specific statement, but I can share with you my general thinking on this whole timeline debate. Sometime next year we will have been there 10 years. A decade. By far our longest war. And I think it is part of my obligation as president to look at our efforts in Afghanistan, in the context of all the other issues that face this country [and? in?] our long-term national security. And I owe it to the American people and I owe it to the troops who have been on tour after tour of duty, and where I may be making further demands on them, that they have some clarity about where we're going and how soon we might get there. This goes back to our earlier point about the nature of war. It is very easy to imagine a situation in which, in the absence of a clear strategy, we ended up staying in Afghanistan for another five years, another eight years, another 10 years. And we would do it not with clear intentions but rather just out of inertia. Or an unwillingness to ask tough questions. So what the timeline did, from my perspective, is, number one, it reminded us that we'd been there for eight years, going on nine, and that there's urgency here. It reminded the Afghan government that, as a sovereign state, they have responsibilities and that ISAF is not going to be there forever. It forced, I think, our military to think not in terms of infinite time and infinite resources but rather, what exactly are we trying to accomplish here and how are we going to get it done? And part of what it did was it pushed the initial timeframe that McChrystal had presented to the left. Because when I first got his assessment, what you had was a situation in which ...

Q: This is what they ... This is where you've... The graph where you said, let's move this to the left.

Obama: The notion that we would not have most of these troops in until the beginning of 2011 was not acceptable to me. And so I asked some very particular questions about why it's taking so long.

Q: And if you look at this, what they're proposing in November, it almost looks like no exit.

Obama: It... It ends at [2015?], but we're still way out there. And what I said was that from the vantage point of our overall national security interests and our redefined goal in terms of what we're trying to accomplish in Afghanistan, we've got to make sure that we're getting troops in faster, and we've got to say to the Afghan government, we're going to thin out starting in 2011 so that you have to start taking seriously how you are training your army, how you're training your police forces. Now, our commitment to your long-term security and stability will extend for a very long time, in the same what that our commitment to Iraq will extend beyond our combat role there. But it's time for us to start thinking in terms of how you guys are going to be able to stand on your own two feet.

Gibbs: [?], got about 10 minutes.

Q: Okay, now, I'm going to go through ... It's not fair for me to have things and not at least ask you.

Obama: You go ahead. Go ahead.

Q: Does that...

Obama: Yeah, yeah. Some of them I'll just say no comment, and if some of them are flat wrong, then I may say that's flat wrong.

Q: Good. That's great. Look, I'm trying... This isn't a ...

Obama: I know.

Q: This is ... I'm trying to excavate, and I appreciate...

Obama: I read your books, Bob. I know what you do, [man?]. [Laughter.] You know? I've purchased them with my own hard-earned money. I don't get them free. [This one I suspect I'll get?]

Q: Okay, thank you. I'm honored.

Gibbs: [?].

Q: I'll send you this one. What should I call it?

Obama: I don't know. You don't have a title yet?

Q: Don't. Don't.

Obama: Interesting.

Q: I mean, you look at that chart, and somebody said, No Exit, that's what this should be called.

Obama: No. I think ... Because that's premised on the notion that ... You're writing a history halfway through. Now, when I say halfway, I don't mean halfway in terms of time.

Q: I understand.

Obama: It's not complete. You don't yet know the ending, so you wouldn't want a [?] like No Exit. That seems ...

Q: Because exits... I mean, that's what you want, isn't it?

Obama: Because there is going to come a point in time in which the United States' combat function in Afghanistan will have ceased.

Q: Now, remember the hybrid option that was discussed in the meetings, about 20,000, maybe, counterterrorism, counterinsurgency both?

Obama: Right. Right.

Q: And they did a war game at the Pentagon.

Obama: I vaguely recall.

Q: And it was called Poignant Vision.

Obama: Well, see, there you go.

Q: Which I don't... And I've gone through notes of it, and I know in the strategy sessions, they said, well, our war game showed this wouldn't work. The notes I have and the accounts of

people I have there, it was a seminar. I mean, you can't run a war game on counterinsurgency.

Obama: [Right?].

Q: And what happened there and what they presented to you were two different things.

Obama: Let me say this.

Q: Sure.

Obama: That the decisions that I ultimately made were not based on any particular war game, any particular document. They were made based on a comprehensive overview of all the data points that were coming in from a wide variety of sources.

Q: And you were pushing in November for another option beyond what Gates had sent you of the 30,000 to 35,000?

Obama: Well, I think it's fair to say - this has been widely reported, I don't think it's a secret - that the initial request made by General McChrystal, from my perspective, did not match up with the refined strategy and goals that resulted from the review. And so the whole point here was, the point of the review was no to get the strategy to fit the resource request. The point was to get the strategy right and then have the resources both in terms of how they were deployed, how quickly they were deployed, how large [it?] was...

Q: And you're pushing for other options.

Obama: At that point what I said was, let's make sure that having gone through this extensive exercise of refining what our goals and objectives are, let's make sure that we are suiting the resources to where we ended up.

Q: And Gates gave you one, 30,000 to 35,000. And then you kept pushing for another one.

Obama: Well, I... Part of, one element I want to add to this is there was also a significant debate about our allied, contributions from our allies.

Q: Yes, sir. Understand.

Obama: Part of what I was thinking in terms of overall objectives here was sustaining and improving the buy-in of our allies, who...

Q: Right. And this was the final decision.

Obama: ...who had made some significant sacrifices, were under enormous political pressure. Had stood up to that political pressure, in impressive ways. But the fact of the matter is, is that if we were going to commit ourselves to a surge strategy that gave the Afghan government time and space to build up its forces, then we wanted to make sure that all the allies were bought into the strategy and were investing in the strategy as well.

Q: And on November 11 you specifically asked Gates, I want another option. And he said, Mr. President, I believe we owe you that. And you never got another option. In fact, you designed the option, as best I can tell, yourself.

Obama: Well, I think that it was an iterative process between myself, Gates, Mullen, McChrystal, Petraeus. I think working with the military, I kept on asking questions until we got to a point where we had a resource package that could meet our goals and objectives.

Q: But you designed that, as best I can tell.

Obama: What is fair is that I was involved... [Laughter.] I was more involved in that process than it was probably typical.

Q: Yes. And were you disappointed that the military wouldn't give you that other option that you wanted? Just from the outside, sir, Mr. President, I watch that and I go through, talk to people, look at the notes, very detailed. And you're, you say, I want another option. Essentially, you're giving me the same option. Because they were - 40,000, 36,000, 30,000, 35,000. And you hold their feet to the fire on the question, they say, yeah, we owe you another option, and you don't get it.

Obama: Well, the... Rather than focus on that particular moment, let me just broaden it for a second and say this. I still remember the conversation that I had with General Petraeus when I was a candidate for president and I traveled to Iraq. And

we had what I thought was a really good discussion. It's interesting, some ...

Q: Got reported as...

Obama: It's been reported as tense or explosive... It wasn't. It was actually a really instructive and engaging process in which my respect for General Petraeus only grew. But the nub of the conversation, without going into details, was this. At that point I was already on record as saying...

Q: Yes.

Obama: Not only had I opposed the war, but I'd questioned a indefinite commitment in Iraq. And essentially after General Petraeus' presentation, I said, General, your job is to succeed in Iraq. And in the same way that one of your commanders who are under you, if they're in Anbar in a particular province, are going to tell you they need this, that and the other, they're going to ask for everything, and then you've got to make decisions looking at the whole picture of Iraq in terms of what's going to make it most likely for you to succeed. My job, if I have the honor of being commander in chief, is going to be to look at the whole picture. I expect you, as the commander of our forces in Iraq, to ask for everything you need and more, to ensure your success. That's what you owe the troops who are under your command. My job, then, which in some ways is more difficult is, I've got to choose. Because I don't have infinite resources. And so I guess I use that to frame a lot of the broader tensions between the military and civilian, or at least White House, officials. It was in the spirit, I think, of mutual respect, but their job is to win this war now. And what can we do to do that?

Q: And that's the only job they have.

Obama: And that's the only job they have. And I've got a different job. My job is to look at the big picture. So in that context, I think it is entirely fair to say that there was a lot of back and forth.

Q: Indeed there was.

Obama: And that my goal throughout was to help the military sharpen its understanding of what I, as the civilian commander, was trying to accomplish. What I saw as the objectives. And then for them then to properly resource that.

Q: I have the six-page memo that you gave everyone, that you handed out when you made your decision.

Obama: Right.

Q: And it's clear what it is.

[A woman enters.]

Obama: Yeah. This is the hook, also known as Katie.
[Laughter.]

Q: Katie, how are you?

Katie: Hello. Nice to meet you.

Obama: But we can finish.

Q: Okay. Did Gates get to a point where he said, Mr. President, these are our generals, this is our chairman of the Joint Chiefs. They are all saying 40,000. He's giving you an option of 30,000. We can't go any lower.

Obama: No. That never happened.

Q: That never happened?

Obama: No. Gates... Bob Gates has, I think, served me extraordinarily well. And part of the reason is, you know, I'm not sure if he considers this an insult or a compliment, but he and I actually think a lot alike, in broad terms. Now, he has a different job than I do. And part of the job of secretary of defense is tending to a particular constituency within the Pentagon. But the interactions that I had with Bob were always very helpful to me. And part of the reason, he's one quote I will share.

Q: Thank you.

Obama: Give you just a little bit of color, a little bone to throw you here right at the end. And I don't think Bob would

feel like I was betraying a confidence on this. I do recall during this process, and me asking a bunch of questions about how fast we could achieve our objectives, the nature of our strategy, and so forth. And Bob saying, Mr. President, I sign too many letters to families to want to go along with a strategy that I don't think is working. And if we, having given it the best shot that we've got, having thought this through and chosen a particular course, make a conclusion that it's not working, Mr. President, I will always be the first one to tell you. Because that weighs heavily on me, too. Now, I'm paraphrasing. That's not an exact quote. But I believe that about Bob. I actually believe that about all the people who were involved in this decision. There are going to be some, at any given point, differences because this is hard. This is not an easy proposition. And very rapidly, you get out of a ideological debate of the sort that I think plays out in the press or on Capitol Hill. When you're involved in these decisions, you're not thinking left, right, hawk, dove, conservative, liberal. You're thinking, how do we solve a very knotty problem in a way that ultimately makes America safe?

Q: The record shows that, for what... There is debate, there is... On the Asia trip, after you were almost finished with the strategy review, you told General Jones, my goal is to keep Gates. I do not want to break with the secretary of defense. What triggered that?

Obama: I would dispute a direct quote like that. What is absolutely true is that my relationship with Bob is sufficiently close, and my respect for the job that he's been doing is sufficiently high, that I would take his views very heavily into account in any final decision that I made. Partly because I'm asking him to execute.

Q: Why did you pick 30,000 troops?

Obama: At the end of the review process - and this is probably going to have to be the last question, Bob, unless you've just got one that you have to ...

Q: I have 30. [Laughter.]

Obama: Since [we're? you're?] not going to get 30...

Q: Lynchpin moments. Just so...

Obama: But at the end of this process, something that I consistently emphasize to our military was, don't bite off more than you can chew. If in fact our goal here is to blunt the Taliban's momentum, control key population centers and transit centers, and partner with Afghan forces so that they've got an effective training process where they can be stood up, then let's define those boundaries. Let's figure out what we need to resource that, and let's not go beyond that. Particularly if I'm going to be putting pressure on our allies to make contributions as well. So the 30,000 grew organically from the strategy. This is what I was told would be necessary in order to accomplish the strategy that we had agreed to. All right?

Q: And, last thing. General Powell advised you a couple of times. And someone said he really said to you during this review process, you're the commander in chief. These guys work for you. Because they are unanimous in their advice doesn't make it right. There are other generals. There is only one commander in chief.

Obama: You know, General Powell and I talk[ed?]. And I consider him a friend. And since he's now out of that building, every once in a while I'll check in with him. I'll leave it at that.

Q: [Laughs.] Okay. It sounds ... I haven't asked him, but it sounds right.

Obama: Well...

Q: And it's true.

Obama: Here's what I'll say, is that ... And this is probably a good place to end, because some of this, some of the narrative you're developing obviously has to do with the relationship between the civilian and military arms of our government. I am probably the first president who is young enough that the Vietnam War wasn't at the core of my development.

Q: That's true.

Obama: So what that means is, on the one hand, I grew up with none of the baggage that arose out of the dispute of the Vietnam War and the dispute back home. I grew up revering the military. And never questioning that, regardless of what you thought of a war, what our troops do is unbelievable. On the other hand, I also had a lot of confidence, I guess, coming in that the way our system of government works, civilians have to make policy decisions. And then the military carries them out. You know, I don't see this as a civilian versus military situation the way I think a lot of people coming out of Vietnam do. I also don't see it as a hawk/dove kind of thing. I see it as my job is to provide clarity of mission to our military. The military's job is to say to me, Mr. President, here's what we'd need to carry out your objectives. If you want us to go ahead, we'll salute, but we're going to give you honest feedback, constantly, about whether we think this is or isn't going to work. And so a lot of the political frames through which these debates are being viewed don't really connect with me generationally. I'm neither intimidated by our military, nor am I thinking that they're somehow trying to undermine my role as commander in chief. I think they're trying to do a job and I'm trying to do a job.

Q: Let me ask you this last question, which is really important.

Obama: Okay.

Q: When you met alone with Petraeus, and he's taking McChrystal's place. It was your idea, wasn't it, to put Petraeus in there?

Obama: Yeah.

Q: How'd you come up with that idea?

Obama: One of the concerns we had ... I felt that it was important for the reasons that I said in my Rose Garden statement to replace McChrystal. But we are, we've got a lot of business in Afghanistan right now. We had to move very quickly. I thought it was important to have somebody who understood Afghanistan, somebody who had both the political and diplomatic skills as well as the military skills to pull this off. And that would least disrupt any momentum that we might have built. And

Dave Petraeus was [the only person? the officer?] [who? that?] fit the bill.

Q: And it's a demotion, technically.

Obama: I think that Dave Petraeus understands that this is the single most important job that anybody in our military could be doing right now. So he...

Q: When you met with him for...

Obama: ...he certainly doesn't consider it [one?].

Q: When you met with him alone for 40 minutes... He often tells people, in the military we're not self-employed. Did he tell you that?

Obama: I think he is a great patriot, and the sacrifice that he's making and his wife is making in being willing to take this assignment is extraordinary. Okay. That's it. [I have to go?].

Q: Okay. There are unanswered questions.

Obama: Of course there are.

Q: Thanks, sir.

Obama: You know, but sounds like you've got better sources than I do.

Q: No, sir.

Obama: You know what we need to do is - you know, have you ever thought of being the DNI [?]. [Laughter.] Huh? Or CIA?

Gibbs: That would be [?]. [Laughter.]

Obama: But you know, the guy... Right?

[Recording ends.]